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ABSTRACT

In the spring semester of 1997 an ethnographic study of the teaching of personal narrative at Boston College was conducted. A doctoral student worked with an undergraduate who wrote a personal narrative about her alcoholic father. Two issues arise when teaching autobiographical writing: potential problems with psycho-cognitive distance between teacher and student; and difficulties in dealing with editing issues. For the assignment on personal narrative, the undergraduate produced a very powerful and well-written essay about the pain she feels from her father's alcoholism. Although the doctoral student did focus on sentence level error, she was by no means disengaged from the pathos in the essay. She openly acknowledged to the undergraduate that she understood the weight of the content of the subject and that comments on technicalities were only in the service of making the paper better. Conference conversations between the two illustrate that writing personal narrative is not easy and the rhetorical quandary that emanates from a writing process in the college classroom may call attention to an unexpected need for reconsideration on an affective level. Teachers can work with students over issues like word choice, grammar, and punctuation without denigrating their efforts to write honestly and sincerely. (CR)

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"I'm Really Struggling with this Class": Evaluating the Writing When the Writer is in Pain[1]

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

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[1] This paper is excerpted from my doctoral dissertation: "Expressivist Pedagogy: The Politics and Practice of Teaching the Personal Narrative." I will defend in the Summer of 1998 at Northeastern University.

Let us, for a moment, imagine a student who is alert and insightful, engages actively in classroom discourse, and writes clear, well-organized and compelling papers. The student invites you home to meet her family, perhaps for Sunday dinner or Friday night Shabbos dinner. It seems like a nice way to spend some time, so you go. As soon as you arrive, you wonder if you haven't made some sort of mistake. It is a while before anyone opens the door, perhaps because the shouting is so loud that no one hears the doorbell. Your student, let's just call her Catherine, finally welcomes you. Her cheeks are stained with tears and she seems nervous and embarrassed. There is no sign of dinner or even a set table. Catherine's mother comes in and curtly greets you. Her face is red and she appears to be very angry. Catherine's father is yelling in the background and then there is thudding as he chases someone up the steps. When he comes down to meet you, he is still flustered, his eyes are red, and his gait is uneven. How would you feel?

This may not be the kind of guided fantasy offered by a holistic healer, but it does simulate for me the experience of reading many of my students' personal narratives. I simply do not know how to behave when I am invited inside the textual representation of their families. Yet I know that when asked to write about a first person experience, many students offer this type of traumatic story as if seeking an audience for events which they may never have shared with an adult outside the home. How do we respond as composition teachers?

There have been many criticisms of the teaching of personal narrative in the academy. Since the title of this session is "Finding Room for Our Stories in the Academy," I am not going to dwell on them. David Bleich cautions us not to practice a pedagogy of self-disclosure under compulsory conditions, but rather where there is "a 'readiness' of context, which includes a certain level of trust of peers and authority

figures." He adds, "[M]odes of self-disclosure are what many students have longed for since I have been in school but were taught to confine to ultra-private, often unsharable social locations apart from school" (48). The focus of this paper will be a demonstration of how one teacher worked with one student who chose to tell a troubling story.

In the spring semester of 1997 I conducted an ethnographic study of the teaching of personal narrative at Boston College. One of my informants was a doctoral student in her mid-twenties. "Helena" identifies herself as African American but she is part Latino. In this paper I will focus on her work with a white student, "Catherine" as she drafted and revised a paper about her father's alcoholism. The assignment was to write a personal narrative. When I asked Catherine about her invention process she told me that her father's alcoholism was the first thing she considered. "I attempted to write about other things, but I could never get past this topic ... I needed to put this on paper." I see their work together as demonstrating that it is possible to teach writing skills to a student who chooses to write about a painful topic. There are two issues which arise when teaching autobiographical writing in the academy: 1) potential problems with what I call psycho-cognitive distance between teacher and student, and 2) difficulties in dealing with editing issues.

The problem with a pedagogy that invites personal essays is that the teacher may feel so much discomfort when textually transported to a student's home that she has difficulty performing her customary duties as a teacher. In her book Expressive Discourse Jeanette Harris points out that assessment and evaluation are enormously difficult, if not impossible, with personal narratives.

> Who among us feels comfortable evaluating an essay in which a student tells of a personal tragedy? Even if the essay is almost incoherent and riddled with

> errors, we are loath to denigrate the student's effort to write honestly and sincerely. (176)

Harris is arguing that it is difficult to "correct" a paper whose subject is a personal tragedy. I have felt the discomfort she is describing.

The question becomes how do we as composition teachers stay connected to the emotional life our students choose to write about while remaining separate enough to support a strong revision process? As I see it, there is a range of responses that teachers can make to their students' autobiographical writing. We will see where Helena's work lies along the spectrum of psycho-cognitive distance.

Borrowing some terms from the family therapist Salvador Minuchin helps to characterize some very different responses. In discussing the transactional rules for participation among family members, he uses the words "diffuse" or enmeshed and "disengaged." Minuchin writes,

> All families can be conceived of as falling somewhere along a continuum whose poles are the two extremes of diffuse boundaries, or enmeshment, and overly rigid boundaries, disengaged. The enmeshed family is a system which has turned upon itself, developing its own microcosm. There is a high degree of communication and concern among family members, boundaries are blurred, and differentiation is diffused. … At the opposite extreme, the disengaged family has overly rigid boundaries … The parents in an enmeshed family may become quite upset when a child does not eat dessert. The parents in a disengaged family may not respond to a child's delinquent behavior. (Psychosomatic Families 56-7)

I think that writing faculty often replicate these transactional styles when students write personal narratives. We can be disengaged, enmeshed, or somewhere in-between.

When a student turns in an autobiographical essay and we initially and primarily respond with criticisms of grammar and punctuation, we place ourselves at the disengaged end of the spectrum of psycho-cognitive distance. At the other end of the transactional spectrum lies the kind of enmeshment that Susan Swartzlander and her colleagues warn us about in their essay, "The Ethics of Requiring Students to Write about their Personal Lives." When responding to personal narratives, according to them, it is much too easy for writing faculty to cross the boundary into pseudo-therapist with potentially damaging results. "We know of a faculty member who acted as a therapist with students who revealed incest in their pasts; she held personal 'sessions' after class to discuss incest" (B2).

Helena's transactional style does not fall along either extreme of the spectrum. However, when I first began to observe her work with Catherine, it appeared that her pedagogy was disengaged and current-traditional in its focus on sentence level error and word choice in early drafts.

For the assignment on the personal narrative, Catherine produced a very powerful and well-written essay about the pain she feels from her father's alcoholism. Badly hurt by his blaming her for drinking, she refers to him in the paper as "the corpse" and labels her feelings towards him as "malice." There is no facile, forgiving, all-is-healed resolution. Here are some excerpts from a draft of her paper.

> My Father died just over a year ago. His memory still haunts me, though not as much as his identical corpse which still walks the earth....Each August for two years my father relapsed and left our family....He left that night with beer soaked breath, sputtering that I was the reason why he went back to the bottle....I watched [my mom] break down on the phone when she discovered that our savings were held in a joint account, which could not be touched without my father's consent....I will never be able to fully trust anyone because I live in aching fear of being hurt again....Seventeen years was a

> long, excruciating process of withdrawing love and replacing it with a venomous hatred until I wanted him to die. I wanted my father to die.... Every emotion I feel stems from my father's alcoholism....[T]he hatred has clogged each pore of my body. There is no room for love....To forgive is to have strength, but I am weak. To forgive is to have courage, but I am afraid... I am terrified.

I read the paper for the first time during Helena and Catherine's second conference. In my fieldnotes I wrote,

> I am so focused on the pain about her father's alcoholism that I am having trouble with Helena's [concern with] mechanics and errors. I just want to grab Catherine and tell her I had a parent who died of alcoholism. Helena is focused on diction and me on pain. (How can she? Yesterday she said she probably wouldn't have written about her parents' divorce for the graduate composition theory course because she wouldn't have wanted it to be *the subject of critique*. But she is doing what she feared would happen.)

At the time, my own emotional reaction was so strong it seemed to me that Helena was applying something of a "scorched earth" policy, marching problem by problem through the text (Morse). I was reading the paper for the first time and this was their second conference. Reviewing the transcript months later, what originally struck me as a current-traditional emphasis on errors now seems to be laced with a profound pedagogical sensitivity toward the student. She appears to be choosing her words carefully and she pauses frequently. The march through the paper now appears motivated by a desire to ally with the student around a strong and clear presentation.

As Helena moved forward through the paper, one of her focuses was on word choice. In several instances word choice was not a simple matter of style. Let me play you a brief excerpt from the conference when they are discussing Catherine's use of the word "malice" to describe how she feels toward her father. She struggled to

accept Catherine's attitude, thereby putting herself in a subject position somewhere in-between composition teacher and, for lack of a better word, maybe friend or counselor. Essentially, she was in uncharted disciplinary territory. [PLAY TAPE.]

> H: Okay (pause as the male voice intrudes), okay, umm, again, this is hard. I don't want to pick on // I don't want to pick on (nervous laugh) everything you've written (pause) // Umm, but, in treating it as a piece of writing, I just want you to make the most effective word choices that you can. (Pause.) Umm, okay, so I'm just gonna put a "WC" over there, and you can go back to that. (Pause.) Here I definitely think (pause) a different word will work better there, although I'm not trying to water down umm the ANGER, the hatred that you're talking about. But MALICE implies that you want to bring HARM to (pause) and I don't think that's your meaning or (pause) or IS that? (Nervous laugh.)
>
> C: No, I // I
>
> H: (interrupting) I don't think "malice" is.
>
> C: I // I CAN replace the word, but, in all honesty
>
> H: (interrupting) This is the one you want.
>
> C: given the opportunity, I // I WOULD bring harm to him.
>
> H: Then (quietly) this will be crossed out (nervous laugh). Okay I think I was, because of your use of the words "anger" and "hatred" (pause) before, I think that's the track I was on so that I (pause) imposed.

Catherine's declaration that she feels malice toward her father had to have been difficult for her composition teacher to hear. Yet Helena handled the junction of the rhetorical and the psychological quite well. She would rather not have her student imply that she would bring harm to the man but when Catherine said that was the way she felt, Helena dropped her inquiry, arguing about neither the word nor the feeling.

At the end of the conference Helena told Catherine she had conveyed "the weight of the experience for her." Catherine responded,

> C: Umm. I feel very heavy. I don't know how to describe it. …
> and now I feel like, and this is GOOD, I want to go back and re-WORK it and re-DO it, but at the same time (pause) umm I hate that (pause) so, I know // I KNOW, I'm gonna want to write about much lighter subjects in the future.
> H: Mm hmm. Yeah (pause) and that's FINE … You know you DON'T // you don't have to feel that you have to reveal your DEEPEST things inside you // Do you know what I mean? // for the course, only whatever it is that you want to write about…

I was proud of Catherine for saying she felt "heavy," even if she went on to assure her instructor that all was fine, that she was eager to revise. Writing personal narrative is not easy and the rhetorical quandary that emanates from a writing process in the college classroom may call attention to an unexpected need for reconsideration on an affective level as well.

I interviewed Catherine and Helena separately after this conference. In the interest of time let me just say that there was a key moment in their first conference. Catherine reported that Helena had told her that just because she was focused on grammar, this did not mean she "was missing the content." When I asked Catherine what demonstrated that her teacher was attentive to the content, Catherine, responded, "Well first of all she said she was only going to read the first paragraph initially and when she read the first paragraph she decided to read the whole paper, so, automatically, I knew that // that she was reading it for the story, not for exactly how I'd written it." The act of reading straight through showed Helena to be a human being and not just a correcting machine.

A few days later I also spoke with Helena about what the first conference with Catherine had been like for her.

> H: ... She came in, and I had not YET read the paper, so I TOTALLY didn't know what the paper was about ... And I read the first paragraph and saw what it was about, and I said to her, "Um, well, I'm gonna read through the whole thing." ... I read through it very quickly, ah, because I was VERY interested you know, in what was coming next. And (exhalation) at the end I just paused, I didn't say (pause) ANYTHING ... My first response to her had to do with, you know um, "This is going to be a bit tricky, dealing with this as a piece of writing and also, um, discussing the content of the essay. In other words, when I tell you that you need a comma HERE, I don't want you to think that I have missed the weight of the story."

Although Helena did focus on sentence level error, she was by no means disengaged from the pathos in the essay. She openly acknowledged to the student that she understood the weight of the content of the subject and that comments on technicalities were only in the service of making the paper better.

Both student and teacher tell the story of how what was supposed to be a look at the first paragraph quickly turned into reading the whole essay. As I read the situation, it was that single spontaneous act that enabled them to form a relationship strong enough for one to offer and the other to receive textual critique. In short, Helena's interest in the subject and her sensitivity opened the door for the rhetorical work. In this case, sensitivity meant both an awareness of the student's emotional pain and a respect for disciplinary boundaries. As Philip Morse puts it in his study of student and teacher conferences, "Knowledge of helping agents' communication techniques does not in itself suggest that teachers are counselors or that they will even exercise a counselor's role in the classroom, but rather such skills are ones which are universally applicable in any interactive relationship where one person seeks the help of another, whether the helper be a minister, doctor, coach, family member, or

teacher" (21). Helena was able to function as the kind of helping agent she is paid to be.

Earlier I quoted from Jeanette Harris' book Expressive Discourse. "Who among us feels comfortable evaluating an essay in which a student tells of a personal tragedy? Even if the essay is almost incoherent and riddled with errors, we are loath to denigrate the student's effort to write honestly and sincerely." (176). Harris seems to create a false binary here. Either we correct the paper and denigrate the student's effort to write honestly and sincerely, or we do not correct the paper and leave it incoherent and riddled with errors. My observations of Helena demonstrate that there is a third possibility. We can work with a student over issues like word choice, grammar, and punctuation *without* denigrating her efforts to write honestly and sincerely. There is no necessary opposition between current-traditional pedagogy and a humanistic one.

Finally, Helena appears to be working toward what Kurt Spellmeyer calls "a basic grammar of emotional life," a pedagogy where we can be in touch with what our students "actually 'feel'" (911). Helena and Catherine's work together around this personal essay is a fine example of bringing together what is very often split apart, school assignments and what matters most to students. Personal narratives in the writing classroom are needed to unite the cognitive and the affective domains (Berthoff 27).

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